

A campaign for stronger measures to combat human trafficking is gaining attention in Japan, a country which has long been reluctant to acknowledge that any problem existed. Mieko Takenobu of the Asahi Shimbun newspaper reports....

Every week, small but desperate groups of Thai women seek the aid of their Embassy in Japan, in a last ditch attempt to free themselves from a life of exploitation and violence. They - like dozens of other foreign workers in Japan - are victims of human trafficking. They've been brought to the country to work, often illegally. Many who end up in this underground economy endure appalling conditions in sweatshops and the sex industry.

It's not just women who are victims of human trafficking. Men are trafficked too, to work in the so-called "3-D" industries - Dirty, Dangerous or Difficult jobs, such as construction. Often the traffickers are linked to Japan's organised crime networks, and they will charge the trafficked workers to get them into Japan, place them in work and for food and lodging. "Debts" of 500,000 to 900,000 yen (US \$4,500-8,500) are not uncommon and the result can be a cycle of debt bondage since even when working 10 or more hours a day, many trafficked workers can never repay what they "owe".

Human trafficking really took off in Japan in the 1980's. In response to rapid economic growth, and demand generated by the growing number of bars and restaurants, Thais, Filipinos and Koreans flooded into the country, often through channels linked to organised crime.

Then, as the economy weakened in the 1990's the country tightened controls on immigration, forcing an increasing number of would-be migrant workers into the arms of traffickers and organised crime. At the same time – according to Japan's National Police Agency (NPA), the range of countries from which illegal migrants began their odysseys broadened, with victims from South American and Eastern Europe coming forward.

However, until recently the public took little interest in the problems of migrant workers – Japan remains a society with an extremely low percentage of foreign residents. Things began to change in 2002 when the Japanese Government signed the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (a supplement to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime) and since then a number of symposiums and other events have been held, by both the government and international organisations, to draw attention to the issue.

But significant problems still remain. Although human trafficking from Japan to another country is a criminal offence, there is no provision in the penal code covering trafficking people into Japan.

Many victims of trafficking have no visas, and as "illegal workers" they are reluctant to go to the authorities for help. Keiko Otsu of the HELP Asian Women's Shelter, says, "Many women are threatened by intermediaries that, if they escape they will be imprisoned for staying illegally in the country". Victims are treated as criminals when they seek the help of the police or the Immigration Bureau. Even when the middlemen or traffickers are arrested it is difficult for the victims to claim damages because they will have been deported." The fact that the system does not guarantee the rights of victims makes it difficult to investigate trafficking," Ms Otsu says.

When cases do come to court the victims often find sympathy for their situation is limited. Some members of the judiciary say that since many women know they will be working as prostitutes the issue is simply one of smuggling human beings, not one of force labour. However the Thai Consul, Mr. Pisanu Sobhon, who deals

with many trafficking cases, disagrees. "They are not informed beforehand that their jobs are highly exploitative and arduous, nor that they will not be allowed to go back when they want. This is nothing more than clever deceit and should be considered as forced labour," he says.

NGO's such as HELP and the House for Women Saalaa are now becoming more vocal. Emboldened by the Government's signature of the Protocol on Trafficking in Persons they set up the Japan Network Against Trafficking in Persons (JNATIP), which held its first meeting last year. 10 NGO's attended, a sign that the voluntary community in Japan is gearing up to pressure the public sector and ensure that trafficked women and men get better treatment.